



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

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New Employees Guide

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Natural Resources Conservation Service



The Oregon Natural Resources Conservation Service welcomes you! Here in Oregon we are proud to be a part of the Oregon Conservation Partnership. We work as a dedicated team with the Oregon Soil and Water Conservation Districts and the Oregon Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Division. Together we are succeeding in our effort to assist private landowners in conserving, maintaining and improving our natural resources and environment.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) works directly with landowners to help protect the nation's soil and water resources on private land in a voluntary, science-based approach. In a recent American Customer Satisfaction Index poll, the Natural Resources Conservation Service ranked among such customer-oriented companies as Mercedes Benz and the Marriott Hotels for its customer satisfaction and service.

Landowners receiving technical assistance value its convenience, usefulness, accessibility and clarity, as well as the courtesy and professionalism of those who provide it. NRCS and conservation district employees can be proud of the job they are doing in serving landowners. We know that you will be an important and positive addition to this team.

We hope your time with the Oregon Natural Resources Conservation Service proves to be a valuable and successful experience. With your help, the Oregon Partnership will continue to work towards our vision of creating healthy watersheds while maintaining harmony between the people and the land.

If there is anything I can do to make your transition easier please let me know. Again, we welcome you to the Oregon Natural Resources Conservation Service team.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bob Graham". The signature is fluid and cursive.

BOB GRAHAM
State Conservationist

Overview of USDA

In the Department's early years, the vast majority of Americans lived on farms, and farmers produced only enough food to supply themselves and few other people. Today, although less than 3 percent of the population resides on farmland, farm workers produce enough for this country – as well as for a growing export market. Agriculture is, in fact, this Nation's largest industry and its largest employer – approximately 21 million people work in some phase of agriculture – from growing food and fiber to selling it in the supermarket.

It is USDA's mission to enhance the quality of life for the American people by supporting production of agriculture:

- ensuring a safe, affordable, nutritious, and accessible food supply
- caring for agricultural, forest, and range lands
- supporting sound development of rural communities
- providing economic opportunities for farm and rural residents
- expanding global markets for agricultural and forest products and services
- and working to reduce hunger in America and throughout the world.

Overview of Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)

The NRCS came out of troubled times – the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s. Dust storms ravaged the Nation's farmland, stripping away millions of tons of topsoil. Huge dust clouds carried the soil hundreds of miles, all the way to the Atlantic Ocean. Since that time, NRCS has kept a commitment to protecting and conserving soil and other natural resources on the Nation's 1.6 billion acres of private and other non-Federal land.

NRCS provides technical assistance and information to individuals; communities; tribal governments; Federal, State and local agencies; and others. NRCS also offers financial assistance, surveys the Nation's soils, inventories natural resources conditions and use, provides water supply forecasts for the Western United States, and develops technical guidance for conservation planning.

We are known worldwide for our accomplishments and innovations in conservation. The people of NRCS are recognized for their talent, dedication, and ingenuity in natural resources management. Participation in NRCS' programs is voluntary - the people we serve want us with them as they take necessary steps to reduce erosion, protect wildlife, promote good land use, and implement other measures to preserve the Nation's natural resources for future generations.

At NRCS, we take pride in our partnerships. We work with local soil and water conservation districts (SWCDs), Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils, and others to help people conserve, maintain, and improve our natural resources and environment.

The People of NRCS

The NRCS workforce nationwide is a diverse and highly skilled group of conservationists, biologists, engineers, agronomists focused on the same vision: Harmony between people and the land. Among the most common careers in NRCS are the following:

- ♦ Soil Conservationists spend much of their time in the field working with farmers, ranchers, and other land users. Soil Conservationists offer conservation planning and technical help to everyone from family farmers to local government officials.
- ♦ Soil Scientists map and classify soils, identify problems such as wetness and erosion, and use aerial photographs to map soils and write soil descriptions and prepare other information about soils.
- ♦ Rangeland Management Specialists help plan grazing systems that improve the quality of forage and other grazing land functions.
- ♦ Biologists work in the field with private landowners, other agencies, and units of government. They provide technical support on fish and wildlife habitat development or restoration.
- ♦ Engineers in NRCS use specialized skills in erosion control, water management, structural design, construction, hydraulics, soil mechanics, and environmental protection, along with general engineering skills. Job assignments may include establishing stream-bank and erosion control measures and water supply systems; designing waste management systems and concrete and earthen dams; and applying bioengineering principles to solve a host of natural resource problems.
- ♦ Engineering Technicians assist engineers in surveying, plotting, and laying out construction measures; gathering data; making computations; and preparing maps and cross sections of profiles. They may also serve as construction inspectors on a wide variety of projects.
- ♦ Other Careers in NRCS include Accounting, Agricultural Economics, Agronomy, Aquatic Biology, Business Administration, Cartography, Communications, Computer and Information Technology, Contracting, Forestry, Geology, Human Resources, Hydrology, Landscape Architecture, Plant Sciences, Recreation, Rural Sociology, Watershed Management, Wetland Science, and Wildlife Biology.

How NRCS Is Organized

NRCS employees are stationed in virtually every county in the United States, as well as in the Caribbean and Pacific Basin Areas. Our National Headquarters (NHQ) is located in Washington, D.C., where Chief Bruce Knight provides leadership to the agency.

There are 50 State Conservationists providing leadership to the agency at the state level. Oregon's State Conservationist is Bob Graham. The state organization reflects the major watersheds of Oregon, with eight teams led by Basin Team Leaders.

All NRCS employees in Oregon share the **vision** of a productive Oregon in harmony with a quality environment to promoted healthy watersheds. Our **mission** is to assist landusers and stakeholders in Oregon to make a common vision for their watersheds become a reality.

Our **operating principles** are firm:

- ♦ We respect the land rights of private landowners, and those rights of individuals protected by the Privacy Act.

- ♦ We recognize the important contributions made by the stewards of Oregon's privately owned and tribal lands to the State's economy and quality of life.
- ♦ We believe that the majority of private landusers make responsible resource management decisions when equipped with appropriate data, technical assistance, and incentives.
- ♦ We have confidence that a locally led, watershed-based, voluntary approach to resource management on private lands is key to sustainable resources and healthy watersheds.
- ♦ We value our relationships with other federal, state and local resource agencies with whom common objectives are shared, though our missions may differ.
- ♦ We provide technical assistance in accordance with the Field Office Technical Guide, and constantly strive to update this guide to reflect state of the art technology.

Personnel and Administrative Policies

It will be beneficial for you to read and understand the regulations and policies that apply to your work and conduct as an employee. Each agency within the Department publishes regulations, policies, and procedures to supplement those provided by USDA or to provide information on matters that pertain only to the Agency. Information regarding employment issues is contained in directives, manuals, circulars, and instructions. Your supervisor and the Human Resources staff can assist you with this information.

Ethics and Personal Conduct

As a federal employee you are held to standards of ethical behavior representative of a public servant. These ethical standards are outlined in Executive Order 12674, as modified by Executive Order 12731. There are two core concepts underlying the ethical standards of these Executive Orders: (1) employees shall not use public office for private gain; and employees shall act impartially and not give preferential treatment to any private organization or individual. In addition, employees must avoid any action that would create the appearance that they are violating the law or ethical standards.

You will receive a copy of the "Standards of Ethical Conduct for Employees in the Executive Branch" and your supervisor will allow you one hour of official time to review the ethics regulations. If you need additional time, please continue your review during non-duty hours. If you have any questions about which of the rules applies to you in your current position, or any other questions, please discuss them with your supervisor and/or the State Administrative Officer, who serves as Oregon's Ethics Official.

Political Activities

Under the Hatch Act, Federal employees face restrictions on their ability to participate in political activities.

Generally speaking, Federal employees *may*:

- ♦ be candidates for public office in nonpartisan elections;
- ♦ register and vote as they choose;
- ♦ assist in voter registration drives;
- ♦ express opinions about candidates and issues;
- ♦ contribute money to political organizations;
- ♦ attend political fundraising functions;

- ♦ attend and be active at political rallies and meetings;
- ♦ join and be an active member of a political party or club;
- ♦ sign nominating petitions;
- ♦ campaign for or against referendum questions, constitutional amendments, or municipal ordinances;
- ♦ campaign for or against candidates in partisan elections;
- ♦ make campaign speeches for candidates in partisan elections;
- ♦ distribute campaign literature in partisan elections; and
- ♦ hold office in political clubs or parties.

They ***may not***:

- ♦ use official authority or influence to interfere with an election;
- ♦ solicit or discourage political activity of anyone with business before their agency;
- ♦ solicit or receive political contributions (may be done in certain limited situations by federal labor or other employee organizations);
- ♦ be candidates for public office in partisan elections;
- ♦ engage in political activity while on duty, in a government office, wearing an official uniform or using a government vehicle; or
- ♦ wear political buttons on duty.

Government Property and Supplies

Employees have a duty to protect and conserve Government property and should not use Government property for other than authorized purposes. Government property includes items such as office supplies, telephone and other telecommunications equipment and services, Government mail, automated data processes capabilities, printing and reproduction facilities, Government records, and Government vehicles.

USDA policy provides for limited personal use of Government computer/telecommunications equipment on an occasional basis, provided that the use involves minimal expense to the Government and does not interfere with official business. Occasional personal use of computer/telecommunications resources shall take place during the employee's personal time, not during business hours. Use of the Federal telephone system for personal long-distance calls is not allowed.

While the occasional use of telecommunications resources in moderation is acceptable, uses not consistent with the USDA policy are strictly prohibited. Employees are expected to conduct themselves professionally in the workplace and to refrain from using telecommunications equipment for activities that are inappropriate or offensive to co-workers or the public, such as sexually explicit materials or remarks that ridicule others on the basis of race, creed, religion, color, sex, handicap, national origin, or sexual orientation.

Questions concerning appropriate use of Government property, including telecommunications equipment, should be addressed to your supervisor.

Office Mail

NRCS correspondence, publications and other items are mailed to recipients using official postage. These must conform to postal regulations and to Agency mailing procedures.

Use of Government letterhead and postage-paid privileges for personal purposes is not allowed. Also, note that it is a violation of Federal laws and regulations to use postage-paid Government envelopes to file job applications.

Unless it is an emergency, do not have personal mail or packages sent to your office.

Your Appointment

You have been appointed to your position with the Federal government through one of several types of appointments: career-conditional, career, time-limited (temporary or term), or excepted. The type of appointment you hold determines your eligibility for reinstatement into the federal service if you should decide to leave.

- ♦ Career-Conditional Appointments A career-conditional appointment is a permanent appointment that leads to career tenure after completion of 3 years of continuous service. Career-conditional employees are eligible for promotions and within-grade increases (WGIs) and benefits. Under career-conditional appointments, you must complete a 1-year probationary period. Generally, career-conditional employees may not be promoted, reassigned, or transferred until 3 months after their initial appointment. Employees who do not have veterans' preference and who leave their government jobs while under career-conditional appointments have reinstatement eligibility for 3 years from their date of separation. Therefore, without competing with other candidates, they may be re-employed in a position for which they qualify at the same grade or with no more promotional potential up to that of a position the employee previously held on a permanent basis under career-conditional appointment, even though the employee never reached the full performance level of the career ladder. Employees who have veterans' preference and serve any period of time under their career-conditional appointment have reinstatement eligibility for life.
- ♦ Career Appointments Employees who have completed 3 years without a break in service under career-conditional appointments acquire career tenure and are converted to career appointments. If they leave the federal service as career employees, they have reinstatement eligibility for life.
- ♦ Temporary Appointments Temporary appointments are used to fill short-term employment needs of an organization. Temporary appointments are made for periods not to exceed 1 year but may be extended for one more year. Temporary appointments may be terminated at any time upon written notice. General Service (GS) temporary employees are not eligible for promotions or within-grade increases. Wage Grade (WG) temporary employees are eligible for within-grade increases. Service under a temporary appointment does not confer eligibility for reinstatement.
- ♦ Term Appointments Term appointments are normally used to fill temporary employment needs for a project. Term appointments are at first made for a period of 1 year and may be extended up to 4 years. The appointment may be terminated at any time upon written notice. Term employees are not eligible for promotions but are eligible for within-grade increases, retirement coverage, and health and life insurance. Service under a term appointment does not confer eligibility for reinstatement.
- ♦ Excepted Appointments Excepted appointments are used to fill positions that are exempt by law from the competitive system. Examples of employees under excepted appointments are Students Temporary Employment Program (STEP), Student Career Experience Program (SCEP), people with handicapping conditions, and positions filled by veterans under the

Veterans Readjustment Authority (VRA). Excepted appointments can be either permanent or temporary. Excepted employees under permanent appointments must complete a 1-year trial period.

You will receive a copy of Form SF-50-B, "Notification of Personnel Action". The Nature of Action and Tenure blocks on this form will indicate the type of appointment you have. Your particular type of appointment will determine your eligibility for Federal benefits.

Probationary Period

Upon your initial appointment you may be required to serve a probationary or trial period during your first year of service. This period allows you an opportunity to demonstrate successful job performance. During this period your supervisor will assess your conduct and performance and make a recommendation for your retention or removal.

An employee who does not meet acceptable standards of conduct and/or performance may be removed during the probationary or trial period. If you are separated during the probationary or trial period for unsatisfactory conduct or performance, you do not have the right to appeal the decision; however, if you believe the separation action is discriminatory, you have the right to file a complaint through the EEO Complaint System.

Work Schedule

The standard tour of duty for a full-time employee is a 40-hour basic workweek consisting of 5 days of 8 hours each day, Monday through Friday. Core hours are hours designated during which all employees must be at work. The core hours in NRCS are 9:30am-2:30pm.

NRCS participates in a modified Maxiflex and Compressed Work Schedule. For more information on the alternate work schedules please refer to the NRCS General Manual. Check with your supervisor to see if these alternate work schedules apply to your office.

WebTCAS (Web-based Total Cost Accounting System) & Timekeeping

Each day, you will record the hours you work in our internet-based timekeeping system: WebTCAS. At the end of each two-week pay period, you will finalize and submit your timesheet to your assigned timekeeper.

Your supervisor will provide training to you on the use of WebTCAS and the program, activity and county codes you will use to record your work status. It is important that you accurately record not only your hours of work and leave, but also the activities in which you are involved. Our timekeeping web site is <http://webtcas.nrcs.usda.gov/webtcas/>.

Automated Systems

Human Resources Information System (HRIS) formerly ICAMS or CAMS

HRIS is an automated system for processing personnel actions, establishing performance standards and evaluating performance, and it allows employees access to up to date personal information. The data in the HRIS system is integrated with WebTCAS, our timekeeping system.

The Human Resources Office provides a HRIS ID and password to your supervisor to share with you during your first pay period with NRCS. When you receive them, you will have access to the HRIS system to view your personal data as recorded by the Human Resources Office. The web site is <https://icams.usda.gov>. When you access the HRIS system for the first time, be sure to change your password – and remember it! You should be sure to list your email address in HRIS and set up a password hint so you can get help if you forget your password.

NFC Employee Personal Page

You also have access to your own Employee Personal Page through the USDA National Finance Center (NFC). The Employee Personal Page allows you to view your payroll, leave, travel, life insurance, health insurance, savings bonds, and other personal information and make changes as you require. You'll need a personal identification number (PIN) to access the NFC Employee Personal Page. To obtain one, visit the NFC home page at www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/ and follow the instructions: you'll receive your PIN in the mail shortly thereafter.

Pay and Leave

The GS Pay System

The general schedule (GS) pay system is divided into 15 grades, each of which has 10 steps. Entry-level hiring is normally made into the 1st step of the grade, although there are rare exceptions to this rule. The grade level of an initial hire depends largely on the occupation, as does the career progression up through the grades.

Pay is locality based. For GS employees, there are 30 or so metropolitan locality pay areas and a catchall “rest of the U.S.” (RUS) pay rate for everywhere else within the contiguous 48 states. Raises are set by local labor market conditions, subject to the availability of funds appropriated by Congress.

In Oregon, employees in, Clackamas, Columbia, Marion, Multnomah, Polk, Washington, and Yamhill Counties are paid at a special locality pay rate.

Some GS employees receive a special pay rate because of the shortage of qualified applicants available to fill our jobs. Engineers and Information Technology Specialists receive these special pay rates instead of the locality or RUS pay rates discussed above.

Your Pay

NRCS employees are paid biweekly. Your salary check will be deposited directly to your account at your financial institution through an electronic funds transfer. This will take place every two weeks on designated paydays. Our official payday is the second Thursday of the following pay period, although you'll generally find the EFT payment is deposited in your bank account on the previous Monday.

Your appointment with NRCS probably was effective at the beginning of a pay period. Your first timesheet won't be submitted until the end of that two-week pay period, and it takes our National Finance Center and the Treasury Department a few days to compute your pay and execute the EFT to your bank account. So you will receive your first paycheck approximately three weeks after you begin work. From that point forward, your salary will be deposited every two weeks like clockwork.

Overtime

The federal government complies with the overtime provisions of both the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the Federal Employees Pay and Compensation Act. Eligibility for overtime compensation varies, depending in large part on whether or not you are "exempt" from FLSA provisions. Block 35 on your SF-50-B Notification of Personnel Action, indicates if your position is exempt. Questions about eligibility for overtime may be discussed with your supervisor or the Human Resources Office. **Note that all overtime should be approved in advance.**

Within-Grade Increases (WGIs)

You advance from one step of your grade to the next step by means of a within-grade increase (WGI).

General Schedule employees are eligible for within-grade increases (provided that their performance is at an acceptable level) after completing the following waiting periods:

- ♦ 1 year for advancement to steps 2-4;
- ♦ 2 years for advancement to steps 5-7; and
- ♦ 3 years for advancement to steps 8-10.

In addition, employees who demonstrate outstanding performance of their full range of duties may receive a quality step increase (QSI) of one step under our employee recognition program.

Annual Leave

Annual leave may be used for whatever purposes you desire. Most people use it for vacations and personal business. Use of annual leave must be approved in advance by your supervisor.

You will accrue annual leave for each full pay period of employment unless you have been in a nonpay status for the entire pay period. You earn annual leave based on your number of years of Federal employment, including creditable military service. Full-time employees earn annual leave at the following rates:

- ♦ 4 hours of annual leave/pay period of length of service is less than 3 years

- ♦ 6 hours of annual leave/pay period if length of service is more than 3 years, but less than 15
- ♦ 8 hours of annual leave/pay period if length of service is 15 years or more

Annual leave is accrued by part-time employees on a pro rata basis.

Generally speaking, employees may carry no more than 30 days (240 hours) of unused annual leave from year to year.

Sick Leave

Sick leave may be used when you: receive medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; are incapacitated by physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, or childbirth; would, because of exposure to a communicable disease, jeopardize the health of others by your presence on the job; or must be absent from work for adoption-related activities.

You may also use a limited amount of sick leave to provide care for a family member as the result of physical or mental illness, injury, pregnancy, childbirth, or medical, dental, or optical examination or treatment; or make arrangements necessitated by the death of a family member or attend the funeral of a family member. For more information about Family Leave benefits, contact the Human Resources Office.

For full-time employees, the sick leave accrual rate is 13 days a year; for part-time employees, it's one hour for each 20 in pay status. There is no limit on how much you may accumulate.

Holidays

There are 10 legal holidays: for Federal employees:

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| ♦ New Year's Day | ♦ Labor Day |
| ♦ M. L. King, Jr. Birthday | ♦ Columbus Day |
| ♦ Presidents Day | ♦ Veterans Day |
| ♦ Memorial Day | ♦ Thanksgiving Day |
| ♦ Independence Day | ♦ Christmas Day |

Your Position

Position Classification

Under the GS pay system, jobs are categorized by occupational groups, series, classes, and grades. This system ensures that positions that are similar require comparable qualifications, and that employees who are doing substantially equal work receive equal pay.

The system is designed to provide a systematic grouping of positions by kind of work, level of difficulty and responsibility, and required qualifications of the position.

The classification system is based on a set of written standards and guides, which are used by trained specialists to evaluate and classify positions. Classification Standards are issued by the Office of Personnel Management for use throughout the Government.

It is the position that is classified, not the employee in the position. Consequently, employee performance is not considered in the classification process. Similarly, the volume of work performed, employee's length of service, or superior qualifications are also not considered in classifying a position.

Position Description

Your supervisor will provide you with a description of your job. A position description is the official record of your major duties and responsibilities and the supervisory relationship of your position.

The duties and responsibilities that have been assigned to you will determine your title, the kind of position you occupy, the level or grade, series, and also the base pay that you will receive for performing the work.

If significant changes take place in your job, your supervisor should take immediate steps to see that a new position description is prepared and submitted for classification review. She/he must make certain that it represents the current duties and responsibilities that are assigned to you.

You and your supervisor have joint responsibility for reviewing your position description for accuracy and adequacy.

Performance Standards

You will have a performance work: a written document, developed by your supervisor, that identifies critical elements of your position and the standards by which you will be evaluated. A critical element is a work assignment or responsibility of such importance that unacceptable performance on the element would result in a determination that the employee's overall performance is at the unacceptable, possibly leading to demotion or removal. Non-critical duties are not included in performance plans.

You and your supervisor need to share a common understanding of the supervisor's expectations for your performance, so good communication is very important. In addition, you should discuss the goals of the office, basin and state, and the extent and nature of your involvement and contribution to meeting office goals for the upcoming year.

Your Career

Training

Although you brought considerable skills to NRCS when you joined our workforce, your training is just beginning! Whether it's formal training (such as the self-paced "Introduction to NRCS" or the classroom training course entitled Basic Field Conservation); or on-the-job training provided by your supervisor or other experienced NRCS staff; or technical workshops presented in-state, your professional and technical development will continue.

NRCS encourages all employees to participate in self-development efforts, as well. Discuss your interests with your supervisor – when university or community college courses relate to the work of

NRCS, we may be able to provide tuition assistance to employees who are continuing their formal education after hours.

Promotions and Transfers

Agencies may promote or reassign career or career-conditional employees under a variety of circumstances. They also may make time-limited promotions of up to five years to fill temporary positions, accomplish project work, fill positions temporarily pending reorganization, or to meet other temporary needs.

Generally, General Schedule employees who are promoted to a higher grade must receive a pay increase of at least two steps of the former grade.

A career or career-conditional employee of one agency may transfer, without a break in service, to a competitive service position in another agency without competing in a civil service examination open to the public. A transfer-eligible may apply under vacancy announcements open to status candidates. An employee may transfer to a position at the same, higher, or lower grade level.

Present Federal employees who are serving in the competitive service under a career or career-conditional appointment have eligibility for transfer to a position in the competitive service. To transfer, they must meet the qualification requirements for the position.

Merit Promotion

When a vacancy occurs within NRCS, the selecting official may fill the position through the Merit Promotion Program or other means within Office of Personnel Management and NRCS regulations. Under the Merit Promotion Program, vacancy announcements are published and you as an interested employee may submit an application. (Virtually all vacancy announcements are available on the Internet at www.usajobs.opm.gov .

Vacancy announcements give the job title, series, and grade; describe the duties; outline the qualification requirements; state other knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that are required for the job; and give application procedures. Candidates who have been found to be "basically qualified" by a personnel specialist may then be evaluated by one or more subject matter experts who have knowledge and experience in that field. Candidates who are determined to be the best qualified are then referred to the selecting official for consideration. Selections for jobs are determined by merit.

Qualification requirements for federal positions are described in the OPM Operating Manual, *Qualification Standards for General Schedule Positions*. You may review these standards by visiting the OPM web site at www.opm.gov .

Benefits

Health Insurance

The Federal Employees Health Benefits (FEHB) program is designed to help protect permanent and TERM employees and eligible family members from the expenses of illness and accident. Unlike many private sector health benefit plans, it provides coverage without physical examination, places

no restrictions on age or physical condition, offers a wide range of plans to choose from, and cannot be canceled by the plan in which you enroll. You and the government share the cost of the FEHB program. You must enroll within 60 days of the beginning of your employment, otherwise you will have to wait until the next annual open season. The Human Resources Office furnishes information on available health plans to new employees who are eligible for coverage. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the Human Resources Office.

Long Term Care Insurance

Long term care insurance helps defray the costs of assistance with [activities of daily living](#), such as bathing and dressing. It also includes the kind of care you would need if you had a [severe cognitive impairment](#) like Alzheimer's. It covers skilled, intermediate and custodial care in your home, an adult day care center, an assisted living facility, a nursing home, or a hospice facility. Some plans such as the Federal Long Term Care Insurance Program also cover home care from informal providers such as friends, neighbors and family members who didn't normally live with you at the time you became eligible for benefits.

You are eligible to apply for coverage if you are a permanent or TERM employee during the first 60 days of your employment. You must apply directly for this coverage yourself at the Long Term Care website <http://www.ltcfeds.com>.

Life Insurance

The Federal Employees' Group Life Insurance (FEGLI) program, as the name implies, provides group term life insurance. In most cases, eligible employees are automatically covered by basic life insurance. The cost of basic insurance is shared between you and the government. In addition to the basic life insurance, there are three forms of optional insurance that you may elect.

Unlike the Federal health benefits program, which has annual opportunities to join or change coverage levels, FEGLI open seasons are rare; elections of coverage generally must be made when first offered.

Employees who are eligible to participate in the FEGLI program receive enrollment information from the Human Resources Office. If you have any questions, or haven't received your information, feel free to contact the Human Resources Office.

Medicare

All employees contribute a portion of their earnings towards the Medicare Hospital Insurance Tax (HIT). This tax is included in the FICA deductions for employees who pay the social security tax; while other employees have a specified amount withheld from their salary. This tax is withheld from your gross earnings and are discontinued when yearly earnings reach the maximum wage base level determined by the Social Security Administration.

Retirement

Almost without doubt you are in the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS). That system generally covers everyone hired since January 1, 1984. However, if you had previous Federal employment under the "old" Federal retirement program, the Civil Service Retirement System

(CSRS), and were rehired, you may have been rehired under that system, called CSRS-Offset, which is a mix of CSRS and Social Security coverage. For more information about retirement, see the OPM web site at www.opm.gov or contact the Human Resources Office.

At the time of your appointment to a position providing retirement coverage, the Human Resources Office provides information about the benefits of the system. If you have any questions, or haven't received your information, please feel free to contact the Human Resources Office.

Thrift Savings Plan

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is a valuable way to build up a nest egg for your retirement. It's the government's version of the popular 401(k) plan. The TSP is a payroll withholding based plan. Investments are from pre-tax dollars and investment earnings are tax deferred until withdrawn. FERS employees are allowed to invest up to 15 percent in 2005, up to a threshold set annually by the IRS (in 2005, \$14,000). In 2006 the percentage you can contribute will be limited only by the IRS limit of \$15,000, subject to annual inflation adjustments. Your agency will automatically contribute an amount equal to 1 percent of your basic pay each pay period. You make your own contribution by payroll deductions and your agency matches those contributions according to the following schedule:

FERS Employee Investment - Agency Match

First 3% of basic pay \$1.00 for each \$1.00 you invest

Next 2% of basic pay \$0.50 for each \$1.00 you invest

Next 7% of basic pay 0 (8% in 2003; 9% in 2004; 10% in 2005)

CSRS and CSRS-Offset employees may invest up to 10 percent of salary in the program; they get no government contributions.

The TSP open seasons are being eliminated in July 2005 so you will be able to begin investments, change the amount of investment or change the allocation of how much money you have going into each of the TSP's investment funds at any time. You also can move your account balances among the funds whenever you choose through interfund transfers at the TSP website, www.TSP.gov. The TSP sends participants statements twice annually showing account balances, loan status, vesting status and other information. This information is also available on the website, but password protected. You can sign up for a password to be mailed to you at the website.

You can begin contributing your own money to the TSP within 60 days of being hired as a Federal employee. Your payroll contributions will begin the first full pay period after your agency accepts your TSP Election Form (TSP-1).

If you were hired between June 1 and November 30, the agency will start to make agency contributions the first full pay period in the following June. If you were hired between December 1 and May 31, the agency will begin making agency contributions the first full pay period in the following December. Agency matching contributions don't start until the employee's own investments begin.

Investment Choices

Currently, the TSP has five investment funds available:

- the Government Securities Investment Fund (G Fund), special Treasury issues with an average maturity date of about 14 years;
- the Common Stock Index Fund (C Fund), which tracks the Standard and Poor's 500 index of large U.S. stocks;
- the Fixed Income Index Investment Fund (F Fund), a combination of corporate and government bonds;
- the Small Capitalization Stock Index Investment (S) Fund, tracking the Wilshire 4500 (S Fund); and
- the International Stock Index Investment (I) Fund, which tracks the Morgan Stanley EAFE index (I Fund).

You can track there performance at the TSP website even without a password.

In-Service Loans and Withdrawals

You may gain access to your money during your working career through loans (and in-service withdrawals). When you take a TSP loan, you are borrowing from yourself. Loans are repaid through payroll allotments over the payment period specified in the loan agreement. You can repay the loan in full—plus any unpaid interest—before the end of your loan repayment schedule without penalty.

For more information regarding TSP, please use the TSP website at www.tsp.gov or the TSP ThriftLine at (504) 255-8777.

Civil Rights and Equal Employment Opportunity

We in NRCS are firmly committed to ensuring that every customer and colleague is treated with fairness, equality, and respect; and without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, sexual orientation, marital or family status, political beliefs, parental status, or protected genetic information.

You will receive training about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and amendments, as well as subsequent laws and Executive Orders that clearly define our responsibilities. You will receive particular training regarding Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, which refers to the rights of the American people receiving government programs and services; and Title VII, which addresses the Equal Employment Opportunity rights of employees.

In NRCS, we strive for a workplace that is inclusive and respectful of differences, while working toward unity and harmony. And we deliver programs and services to all people fairly and with integrity and equality.

Grievances

Several processes are available to NRCS employees to address employment-related concerns. Most issues can be easily resolved by simply sitting down with the other party and calmly discussing the situation. However, occasionally outside assistance is helpful to reach resolution. NRCS firmly endorses the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) to address issues when they first arise. Under ADR, a trained mediator works with the parties involved to identify common ground and facilitate the use of a structured process to address concerns and reach agreements. Your supervisor or the Human Resources Office will be happy to provide you with additional information about ADR at your request.

When informal methods don't fully address an employee's concerns, there are two formal methods that may apply: the administrative grievance process, and the EEO complaint process. Information on these systems may be found in 360 Personnel GM 412 and 230 Equal Employment Opportunity GM 401, or you may contact your supervisor or the Human Resources Office for additional information.

Information & Records

Personal Records

An official personnel file (OPF) has been created for you. It is maintained by the Human Resources Office in Portland. You have the right to review the contents of your OPF upon request. Although many records associated with your federal employment are maintained in your OPF, it is important that **YOU** keep a copy of important documents pertaining to your employment, such as:

- Your résumé
- SF-50 Notification of Personnel Action
- Position Description
- Performance Work Plan & Appraisal
- Awards
- Election of benefits (e.g., health & life insurance, TSP enrollment, designation of beneficiary)
- Training plan, certifications & transcripts

It is in your interest to verify the accuracy of information on employment-related documents, and to call any errors to the immediate attention of the Human Resources Office.

You will receive a "Statement of Earnings and Leave" for each pay period that you are employed. It is important to verify that the statement accurately reflects required and, where selected, optional deductions. Report any errors to your Human Resources Office immediately.

You are also responsible for notifying Human Resources of any change in your name, home address, and family status.

The Privacy Act of 1974

You will have occasion to handle an array of information and records concerning the land, landowners and landusers who receive technical assistance from NRCS. You need to understand the impact of pertinent records guidelines, particularly, The Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act, on the way we handle this information.

As a government employee you may have to work with or handle records or information about individuals. Generally, such records will require special handling and safeguarding because they

are subject to the requirements of the Privacy Act. The Privacy Act establishes special requirements for collecting, creating, maintaining, and distributing records that can be retrieved by the name of an individual or other identifier (whether in paper or electronic form). These are called Privacy Act Systems of Records. Our Conservation Plan files are one example of a Privacy Act System of Records.

The subject of a Privacy Act System of Records can ask to see, correct, and appeal the information in that record. These disclosure restrictions are subject to civil and criminal penalties. For more information, contact your Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)/Privacy Act Officer. In Oregon, the State Administrative Officer is our FOIA/PA Officer.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) is meant to ensure that the public has access to information that is maintained by the government. FOIA also recognizes that the government must safeguard certain information that falls under one of the nine FOIA exemptions. Some of the requirements of the Electronic FOIA Amendments of 1996 ensure access to government information maintained in all formats (e.g. E-mail, back-up tapes), and makes more information available to the public electronically. (See the NRCS Freedom of Information Act web site at http://www.info.usda.gov/nrcs_foia/ .

If you receive a request from the public for information, you will need to consult with your supervisor to determine whether the material requested is public or nonpublic information. Even if a request does not cite FOIA, you should still consider whether it is protected under FOIA or the Privacy Act. Refer to 120 GM Part 408 for additional information. Records that are not routinely made available to the public must be requested under FOIA procedures to ensure a thorough review for sensitive information. Consult your supervisor and the FOIA Officer for additional information.

Information Technology Security

Personal Responsibility

IT Security is the personal responsibility of each computer user. The difference between a secure computer system and one that is vulnerable is how the users apply the security measures that are available. The following measures are your computer security responsibilities.

Password & User ID

Never share your user ID or password with anyone else. Don't tape user IDs and passwords to desks, walls, or terminals, or write them down and store them in list finders, desk drawers, etc. Do not save a user ID and password on the hard drive of a notebook computer. Passwords should be a mix of letters, numbers and characters, and be at least eight characters. Avoid using any word found in the dictionary as a password. Never use personal information (names of family members, pets, etc.) for your password.

Log-off Your Computer

Either log-off or use a password protected screen saver when you are away from your desk even briefly. Log-off when you leave the office.

Viruses

Do not open attachments to e-mail messages unless you are positive they could not contain a virus. Never use software or files obtained from the Internet before scanning them for viruses. Do not install software on government computers without first obtaining approval from your IT specialist. Scan any floppy diskette that has been received from an outside source. Insure that the current version of approved virus scanning software is installed and activated on your computer, and use it.

Backups

Computer files on the server are automatically backed-up. Your IT specialist can advise you on the backup procedures you should use for any file that you save on your hard-drive. If these files must be manually backed up, do so frequently. Always keep backups of your files in a secure location.

Copyright Law

Never use unlicensed software on your computer. It is illegal to make copies of copyrighted software.

Travel and Transportation

Travel

Many employees travel to attend training courses or to conduct official Government business. An employee on official travel is expected to exercise the same care in incurring expenses that a person would when traveling on personal business. All travel is to be coordinated with your supervisor to avoid overtime compensation work periods (when possible) and high travel costs. **Discuss travel with your supervisor prior to making final travel plans.**

Travel Expenses

All travel must be approved by your supervisor. If you are required to travel for official purposes, you will be reimbursed for expenses essential to the transaction of official business. Allowable costs include transportation, per diem (which consists of lodging up to a certain amount), and a meal and incidental expenses (M&IE) allowance. Not all expenses incurred while traveling are considered necessary.

Government Travel Credit Card

Employees are mandated to use their government-issued travel charge card to pay for reimbursable travel expenses. All permanent employees who travel at least twice a year must participate in the government travel charge card program.

Every employee is provided detailed information about appropriate and inappropriate uses of the travel credit card, and signs an agreement to abide by the card's terms and conditions, before the card is issued. Any employees who use the charge card for inappropriate or non-official purposes

or who fail to pay their account balance in a timely manner will be subject to disciplinary action, which can range from a letter of reprimand to removal from duty.

Employees are encouraged to charge as many official travel expenses to the credit card as possible since this will help maximize the rebates paid to the government by the bank.

Transit Benefit Program

Employees who use public transportation to commute to work may be eligible to participate in a Transit Benefit Program that reimburses up to \$100/month in transportation costs. Program information and an application are included in materials provided to all new employees.

Use of Motor Vehicles

Most NRCS positions in Oregon are incidental motor vehicle operators, because we must drive to meet with our clients in order to provide technical assistance. Your position description specifies whether you are as an incidental motor vehicle operator – if you are, you are required to maintain a valid State Driver's License. Employees who fail to maintain a valid driver's license or who misuse a GOV may be subject to disciplinary action including possible removal.

Government owned vehicles (GOV) are available at each NRCS office and may be used by employees for official purposes only. Willful misuse of GOVs carries a mandatory minimum penalty of 30 days suspension without pay; misuse of GOVs may be subject to further disciplinary action up to and including removal.

Safety and Health

Accident Reporting and Worker's Compensation

The Federal Employees Compensation Act (FECA) provides workers' compensation benefits to federal employees who sustain job-related injuries or illnesses. If you are injured or suffer an occupational illness at work, you must report this to your supervisor immediately. Follow up with your supervisor to ensure that he/she files the accident or incident report with the Human Resources Office.

- ♦ ***You are responsible for completing and submitting to your supervisor:***
 - The appropriate Dept. of Labor Office of Worker's Compensation Programs (OWCP) form (CA-1, CA-2, CA-16, or CA-17).
- ♦ ***Your supervisor is responsible for submitting:***
 - The appropriate Dept. of Labor OWCP form (CA-1, CA-2, CA-16, or CA-17) to the Human Resources Office.

Further details regarding OWCP benefits may be obtained from the Human Resources Office.

Employee Assistance Program (EAP)

The Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all NRCS employees and their immediate family to help resolve personal and work problems. Marital, financial, alcohol, drugs, family, vocational, work related stress, legal referral, weight/weight loss, physical/medical, dependent care, emotional/psychological counseling are all available through our EAP.

Our EAP provider is Sand Creek Ltd. If you would like to use their services, please call them at 1-888-243-5744 or by email at info@sandcreekeap.com. A professional EAP counselor will work directly and confidentially with you or your family member to help resolve the issue. In some cases, the EAP counselor's role will be to assist in determining how you may use your health insurance or community resources most effectively for future services.

EAP services are provided to you at no cost by NRCS. All services are confidential.

Dress Code

You must dress appropriately for each occasion. Your office or work setting and environment will influence your dress style. Always be neat and clean in whatever you choose to wear. Clothing should be clean and free of rips, tears, or holes.

Your dress style will project a positive or negative image about "you". You broadcast a message in what you wear. We suggest you make an accurate statement in your appearance and transmit a positive, professional image at all times. Remember that your dress is a reflection of you and the Agency. While there is no enforceable dress code in NRCS, you are expected to dress professionally to match the occasion. Shorts, short skirts, crop tops, t-shirts with advertising, etc. are not appropriate dress. Talk to your supervisor and co-workers about safety considerations that you should take into account when heading out to the field (e.g., heavy boots, long sleeves, hats, etc.).

Emergency Procedures

Your supervisor will provide you with a copy of your office's emergency procedures. Please review it carefully and discuss any questions you may have with your supervisor so you will be prepared in the event of an emergency.

Directories

Directories for NRCS offices throughout the country may be accessed through the NRCS national home page: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>. To view/print the latest version of our Oregon directory, go to our home page at <http://www.or.nrcs.usda.gov/> and click on Employee Resources.

A directory of all NRCS, Farm Services Agency (FSA) and Rural Development (RD) employees is available at <http://oip.usda.gov/scripts/ndisapi.dll/ed/pgMain>.

Common NRCS Acronyms

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| AC | Area Conservationist |
| ACP | Agricultural Conservation Program |
| ACRES | Actual Cost Recovery Evaluation System |
| ADP | Automated Data Processing |
| ADR | Alternative Dispute Resolution |
| AL | Annual Leave |
| AO | Administrative Officer |
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| BTL | Basin Team Leader |
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| CAMS | Combined Administrative Management System, now called HRIS |
| CCC | Commodity Credit Corporation |
| CCE | Common Computing Environment |
| CED | County Executive Director |
| CET | Civil Engineering Technician |
| CFC | Combined Federal Campaign |
| CFR | Code of Federal Regulations |
| CO | Conservation Operations |
| COLA | Cost of Living Adjustment |
| CR | Civil Rights |
| CRM | Coordinated Resource Management |
| CRP | Conservation Reserve Program |
| CSRS | Civil Service Retirement System |
| CTA | Conservation Technical Assistance |
| CTAP | Career Transition Assistance Program |
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| DC | District Conservationist |
| DD | District Director |
| | |
| EA | Environmental Assessment |
| EAP | Employee Assistance Program |
| EBI | Environmental Benefits Index |
| ECP | Emergency Conservation Program |
| EDP | Employee Development Plan |
| EE | Environmental Evaluation |
| EEO | Equal Employment Opportunity |
| EEOC | Equal Employment Opportunity Commission |
| EIS | Environmental Impact Statement |
| EQIP | Environmental Quality Incentive Program |
| EWP | Emergency Watershed Program |
| | |
| FAC | Food and Agriculture Council |
| FACTA | Food, Agriculture, Conservation, Trade Act of 1990 |
| FAIR | Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act |
| FEGLI | Federal Employees Group Life Insurance |
| FEHB | Federal Employees Health Benefits |
| FEMA | Federal Emergency Management Agency |

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| FERS | Federal Employees Retirement System |
| FEFFLA | Federal Employees Family Friendly Leave Act |
| FFIS | Foundation Financial Information System |
| FIP | Forestry Incentive Program |
| FLSA | Fair Labor Standards Act |
| FMLA | Family and Medical Leave Act |
| FNM | Financial Management |
| FO | Field Office |
| FOIA | Freedom of Information Act |
| FOTG | Field Office Technical Guide |
| FPP | Farmland Protection Program |
| FSA | Farm Service Agency |
| FTE | Full -Time Equivalent |
| FWP | Federal Women's Program |
| GIS | Geographic Information System |
| GLCI | Grazing Lands Conservation Initiative |
| GM | General Manual |
| GOV | Government-Owned Vehicle |
| GS | General Schedule |
| HACU | Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities |
| HBCU | Historically Black Colleges and Universities |
| HEL | Highly Erodible Land |
| HEP | Hispanic Employment Program |
| HRIS | Human Resources Information System |
| HRO | Human Resources Office |
| IAS | Integrated Accountability System |
| ICTAP | Interagency Career Transition Assistance Program |
| IDP | Individual Development Plan |
| IRM | Information Resource Management |
| IT | Information Technology |
| KCCC | Kansas City Computer Center |
| KSA | Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities |
| LAN | Local Area Network |
| LWOP | Leave Without Pay |
| M&IE | Meals and Incidental Expenses |
| MLRA | Major Land Resource Area |
| MOU | Memorandum of Understanding |
| NACD | National Association of Conservation Districts |
| NAD | National Appeals Division |
| NCC | National Computer Center |
| NEDC | National Employee Development Center |
| NEPA | National Environmental Policy Act |

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|---------------|---|
| NFAC | National Food and Agriculture Council |
| NFC | National Finance Center |
| NFSAM | National Food Security Act Manual |
| NHCP | National Handbook of Conservation Practices |
| NHPA | National Historic Preservation Act |
| NHQ | National Headquarters |
| NPPH | National Planning Procedures Handbook |
| NRCS | Natural Resources Conservation Service |
| NRHP | National Register of Historic Places |
| NRI | National Resources Inventory |
| O&M | Operation and Maintenance |
| OGC | Office of General Counsel |
| OIG | Office of the Inspector General |
| OJT | On-the-Job Training |
| OPF | Official Personnel Folder |
| OPM | Office of Personnel Management |
| OSHA | Occupational Safety and Health Administration |
| OTI | Opportunity to Improve |
| OWCP | Office of Workers Compensation Programs |
| PA | Program Assistant (FSA) |
| PAS | Public Affairs Specialist |
| PC | Personal Computer |
| PD | Position Description |
| PFT | Permanent Full-time |
| PMC | Plant Materials Center |
| POV | Privately Owned Vehicle |
| PP | Pay Period |
| PPT | Permanent Part-time |
| PRMS | Performance and Results Measurement System |
| Pub. L.(P.L.) | Public Law |
| QSI | Quality Step Increase |
| RC&D | Resources Conservation and Development |
| RD | Rural Development |
| RMS | Resource Management Systems |
| SAO | State Administrative Officer |
| SCEP | Student Career Experience Program |
| SED | State Executive Director (FSA) |
| SEPM | Special Emphasis Program Manager |
| SES | Senior Executive Service |
| SF | Standard Form |
| SHPO | State Historic Preservation Officer |
| SL | Sick Leave |
| SO | State Office |
| SSN | Social Security Number |
| STC | State Conservationist |

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| STEP | Student Temporary Employment Program |
| SWCD | Soil and Water Conservation District |
| T&A | Time and Attendance |
| TCAS | Timekeeping system |
| TDD | Telecommunication Device for the Deaf |
| TSP | Thrift Savings Plan |
| USC | United States Code |
| USDA | United States Department of Agriculture |
| WAN | Wide Area Network |
| WebTCAS | Web-based Total Cost Accounting System |
| WGI | Within Grade Increase |
| WHIP | Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program |
| WLA | Workload Analysis Initiative |
| WLMA | Workload Management Analysis |

Useful Government Web Sites

U S Department of Agriculture

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| USDA | http://www.usda.gov/ |
| HRIS / CAMS | https://icams.usda.gov |
| Employee Assistance Program | http://www.andcreekeap.com |
| Employee Directory | http://oip.usda.gov/scripts/ndisapi.dll/ed/pgMain |
| Ethics | http://www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/ethics/ |
| Freedom of Information Act | http://www.info.usda.gov/nrcs_foia/ |
| NRCS | http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/ |
| NRCS Oregon | http://www.or.nrcs.usda.gov/ |

U S Office of Personnel Management

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| OPM | http://www.opm.gov/ |
| USA Jobs | http://www.usajobs.opm.gov |

Other

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|---------------------|---|
| NFC Personal Page | https://www.nfc.usda.gov/personal/ |
| Thrift Savings Plan | http://www.tsp.gov/ |